

The early part of this decade was such a time.

When I took office as Governor in 2001 we faced the worst budget shortfall since the Great Depression, as did many other states. The easy path would have been to create a balanced budget with smoke and mirrors, splice it together with duct tape and hope for the best until the next election.

Or we could have just cut everything 5 percent across the board to be ‘fair’, including Medicaid, mental health and education. Some states did that.

I did cut spending dramatically but also strategically. And I asked for a temporary tax increase to protect education.

I spoke to a joint session of the legislature in my State of the State address and asked them to take a huge political risk. I explained it this way: “I don’t have to be Governor and you don’t have to be in the legislature. But this year 100,000 new 5-year-olds have to show up for kindergarten, and they deserve more than an overcrowded classroom with an overworked, underpaid teacher.”

Our legislature made the right choice, one that reflected real American values. And some of them lost their seats for that vote. But they never lost their character, or forgot their values.

Forgotten values result in forgotten Americans; those who get sacrificed on the altar of empty political gain. This is where character really matters. Policy is either driven by core values or raw politics. Seeking power to serve others is a good and noble endeavor. But seeking power just to be powerful, just to be in the majority or just to hold office, is of no value to the state or the nation.

If we are truly committed to a set of core values, then we must be willing to take political risks, even lose the power, to implement these value-based policies.

Unfortunately Washington seems unwilling to act in this way.

Too many in Washington have forgotten their core principles and left many Americans in their wake. There is too little concern for the common good and too much interest in partisan politics. They lack a respect for the “weak and vulnerable” and show a lack of attention to decisions that will affect Americans for decades to come.

They are focused more on future elections and less on future generations of Americans.

Somewhat ironically, I was asked to speak in Washington recently about the leadership North Carolina has demonstrated in stopping ‘predatory lending’ practices. The conference was focused on personal debt in this country.

The prevailing view is that the American middle class is deep in debt due to over consuming; buying too many cars, big screen TVs and other gadgets. .... This is simply not true.

The reason for the huge growth in middle class debt is that middle class families have to go deeply in debt to educate their kids, care for their parents or pay for health care.